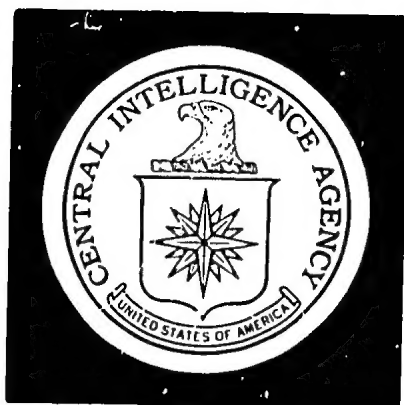


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Intelligence Memorandum

Khmer Communist Combat Forces in Cambodia

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
November 1971

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

KHMER COMMUNIST COMBAT FORCES IN CAMBODIA

Introduction

1. One of the more vexing problems facing the intelligence community is to delineate the size, disposition, and functioning of the Khmer Communist (KC) combat forces in Cambodia. Available reporting has provided a mixed bag of fragmentary and often contradictory data that at best provide only spotty insights on the development of this force structure. The data, however, do provide a consistent theme on the nature of these forces. First, most KC units include Vietnamese Communist cadre, and, second, some of these units are attached to larger Vietnamese Communist formations. This memorandum provides a preliminary assessment of the development and the size of the KC force structure and offers judgments on its current capabilities.

Discussion

Background

2. The Vietnamese Communists began to pressure forces of the government of Cambodia about two weeks after the fall of Prince Sihanouk in March of 1970. In April they began offensive action to expand control north and west of their border base areas, and, by May 1970, Communist forces had moved as far as Siemreab in northwest Cambodia. By the end of July the enemy had taken over most of the area north and east of the Tonle Sap and north of Route 7 and established pockets of control south and southwest of Phnom Penh (see the map).

3. After driving Cambodian forces from these areas, the Communists began to recruit the local Khmer populace into military units. In addition,

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they sought to create a KC political infrastructure to administer local government in the Communist-controlled areas and to provide Communist military units with food collected as taxes from the local population.⁽¹⁾ KC Military Regions (KC MRs) were established throughout the country apparently based on former Khmer Rouge and possibly Viet Minh administrative areas.

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There is evidence, however, to indicate that KC MRs have been established in other areas. These KC MRs are in addition to those created by the Vietnamese Communists for the control of their main force units in Cambodia.⁽²⁾

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4. The development of KC military forces initially departed from the traditional Communist pyramidal pattern noted in the South Vietnamese insurgent movement. In that insurgency the Communists first established guerrilla units at the village and hamlet level; then local force units at the district and province level; and, finally, main force units at the military region level. In Cambodia, however, building of all three echelons of the insurgent force structure was pushed simultaneously, with the VC/NVA main force units serving as the principal element around which indigenous Communist forces were established. Although the short time frame available to develop an occupation force was the most significant consideration underlying this new approach, the historic animosities between the Khmers and the Vietnamese – as well as the fact that indigenous support for the Communist movement in Cambodia itself has been very shallow – were also contributing factors.

KC Combat Strength

5. KC combat strength is currently estimated to be within a range of 15,000 to 30,000 men. This estimate includes only those personnel believed to have a significant combat capability. Thus, it does not include personnel assigned to the KC political infrastructure, administrative services units, or the village and hamlet guerrilla forces. The low end of the combat force range represents those forces actually identified in Cambodia, while

1. In Stoeng Treng, for example, the Vietnamese Communists in mid-1970 established province, district, village, and hamlet administrations staffed by their own people. After recruiting and training local Khmers, these administrations were turned over to the Cambodians.

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the upper end of the range attempts to quantify what the force could be -- based on a set of "reasonable" assumptions. Information that would permit direct quantification of the total Communist force structure (both Vietnamese and Khmer) is not currently available. In addition, there are insufficient data to separate the Khmer out of the combined force structure. As a result, it has been necessary to employ an indirect estimating methodology based on a broad range of assumptions about the Communist recruiting success in Cambodia. This approach takes the known recruiting successes for the few identified KC units and extrapolates that experience over the Communist-controlled and contested areas of the country.

6. These 15,000 to 30,000 men are organized into battalions subordinate to KC sub-regions⁽³⁾ or companies subordinate to KC districts or are integrated directly into VC/NVA main force regiments. The KC sub-region battalions and district companies comprise the Communist local force structure in Cambodia; while the Khmer integrated into the Vietnamese-dominated main force regiments comprise the KC input to the Communist main forces.

7. Sub-region and district forces have been formed in the Communist-controlled and contested areas in Cambodia. Although the evidence of their formation is incomplete, a fairly clear picture of their organization can be constructed. The KC sub-region unit is subordinate to the sub-region party committee and consists of a headquarters and from one to three combat battalions. The headquarters usually contains a number of Vietnamese cadre who hold key control positions and carry out most of the specialized staff functions. Vietnamese cadre are also heavily involved in the headquarters training unit, which is responsible for the indoctrination and training of local Khmer recruits. It is believed that sub-region units have been established in at least 10 of Cambodia's 19 provinces, and possibly in all 19.

8. The low end of the range for sub-region force strength was estimated by assuming, on the basis of firm reports for several provinces, that the Communists have established sub-region units of at least one battalion in each of the 10 Cambodian government provinces in which a Communist infrastructure has been identified. The high end of the sub-region estimate was reached by assuming that the Communists had established at least one sub-region battalion averaging 250 men in all 19 of Cambodia's provinces and an average of two additional battalion equivalents in each of the 10 provinces with identified infrastructures (based on evidence that this had been done in Kampong Thum, Prey Veng, and

3. A KC sub-region (also known as a sector or zone) appears to be roughly equivalent to a Cambodian government province in echelon.

Kandal Provinces). This procedure yields an estimate of from 2,500 to 10,000 men in KC sub-region units.

9. KC district units, like their sub-region seniors, are subordinate to the appropriate party committee. They consist of a headquarters and one or more combat companies and have a small detachment of Vietnamese advisers who perform many of the same functions as those at the sub-region level. It is currently estimated that the Communists have established district units in at least 53 of Cambodia's 131 districts. These districts have been under Communist control for some time and are believed to have organized KC infrastructures in place. The Cambodian government is believed to control about 40 districts and, therefore, is able to prevent the formation of combat-effective district units in these areas. There is very little information available on the remaining contested districts, and the total number of KC district units in them is unknown.

10. The estimated low end of the number of district units was obtained by identifying the number of districts believed to be actually under enemy control and assigning a district unit to each. The high end of the range was reached by taking the number of FANK-controlled districts and subtracting them from the total number of districts in Cambodia. This methodology yields a range of from 53 to 90 districts with KC units. Multiplying these figures by the reported average district strength of 130 men per unit yields a range of from 7,000 to 12,000 men in district units. The average district strength of 130 men includes two infantry companies and their associated combat support personnel. Some district administrative services personnel also may be included in this average, but available evidence does not permit them to be broken out.

11. In addition to the discrete sub-region and district forces, other Khmer have been recruited directly into Vietnamese-dominated regimental echelon units. The number of Khmer in these units varies considerably. Interrogation reports indicate that the 203rd Regiment in Siemreab Province has as many as 750 Khmer in its ranks, whereas the 201st Regiment in Kampong Thum Province is reported to be mostly Vietnamese. In order to account for the Khmer recruited into these mixed Vietnamese/KC units, an assessment was made of each enemy regiment in Cambodia to determine the probable number of Khmer battalion equivalents attached to it. This assessment produced a range of from 5,000 to 8,000 Khmer directly recruited into enemy main force units. Combining the estimated strengths of the Khmer in sub-region, district, and main force units (and rounding the figures) yields a total KC combat strength of 15,000 to 30,000 men.⁽⁴⁾

4. *The remaining components of the KC force structure, the village and hamlet guerrilla units, are not included in the combat strength estimate. These units are generally of platoon size and are lightly armed with older weapons. The local Khmer in these units have had relatively little training, usually only amounting to a week or two of instruction from a Vietnamese soldier. Because of their small size, light armament, and lack of training, these units are usually relegated to such duties as standing guard, intelligence gathering, spreading propaganda, and collecting supplies from the local population.*

Recruitment

12. Khmer Communist forces initially were recruited in the areas contiguous to the traditional VC/NVA base areas along the Cambodia-South Vietnam border. Some local Khmer were recruited directly into the Vietnamese main force units, while others were formed into lightly armed local units and instructed in the defense of their own villages. As the Vietnamese forces moved deeper into Cambodia, this pattern of recruitment was continued. More Khmer were recruited into the VC/NVA main force structure and Vietnamese cadre were placed in villages and began to recruit more local military units. When the KC political infrastructure began to operate above the village level, additional KC units were recruited and attached to the infrastructure at the provincial and district echelons.

13. In addition to the Khmer currently being recruited in Cambodia, ethnic Khmer trained in North Vietnam have been re-infiltrated to join the KC ranks. These personnel were recruited in Cambodia during the Viet Minh, Sihanouk, and post-Sihanouk periods and sent north for training in Communist doctrine and military science. The total number of Khmer personnel re-infiltrated from North Vietnam thus far is unclear. Captured documents and interrogation reports indicate that at least several hundred Hanoi-trained Khmer have come down the trail, and one unconfirmed interrogation report suggests that the number coming down since 1962 runs to several thousand.

14. In general, the Khmer have been reluctant to join the Vietnamese-dominated KC military units owing to their traditional distrust of the Vietnamese. Many Khmer have been drafted into service, while others have joined in hopes of making things better for their families in the Communist-controlled areas. At best, most of the KC personnel are reluctant soldiers, and many have deserted or rallied to FANK at the first opportunity. Even the Communist groups established in Cambodia prior to the fall of Prince Sihanouk are often reluctant to cooperate with the Vietnamese. Initially the Vietnamese attempted to dominate these groups and to incorporate them into the developing KC infrastructure. This effort has not been entirely successful, however, and in many areas they seem to operate as quasi-independent organizations. Nevertheless, the military units associated with these groups have been included in the combat force estimates, even though some of them may be operating independently.

Disputes and Desertions

15. There have been numerous reports of disputes between the KC and their Vietnamese mentors. They have arisen over such things as the distribution of tax receipts, travel restrictions (some imposed by the

VC/NVA on the Khmer, others imposed by the Khmer on the VC/NVA), and the reluctance of the Vietnamese to equip some KC units with modern arms. Some of these disputes have even resulted in fire fights between the two ostensible allies.

16. One prominent example of the failure of KC and VC/NVA to agree on objectives is the case of the VC/NVA-proposed attack on Kampot City. A rallier reports that the KC refused to participate in, or give permission for, the attack. This refusal at least temporarily prevented the Vietnamese from proceeding on their own. The Khmer are reported to feel that the VC/NVA should concern themselves only with attacking and driving Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces from Cambodia and should leave attacks on FANK positions to KC discretion. There have also been numerous reports of KC desertions or of KC rallying to the Cambodian government. In the Kompong Trabek area of Prey Veng Province, for example, 60 KC rallied to FANK units operating in the area during the period 22 through 28 July 1971. Since 18 March 1971, FANK claims to have received more than 4,500 KC ralliers.

Current Combat Capability

17. The present combat capability of the KC forces is estimated to be much lower than that of their Vietnamese counterparts. This lower capability stems from three main causes: low motivation, relatively poor training, and a lack of modern arms for a large part of the force structure. A low level of motivation stems from the fact that many of the KC are serving under duress, are not well treated, and do not trust the Vietnamese. The poor training results from the absence of good training facilities coupled with a shortage of Vietnamese who speak the Khmer language. The lack of modern arms apparently stems from Vietnamese mistrust of the Khmers - the usual practice is for many KC units to be loaned newer weapons only for the conduct of specific Vietnamese-directed missions. After the mission is completed the weapons must be returned to the Vietnamese.

18. The combination of these three factors has resulted in making many KC units, especially those with few Vietnamese in them, unreliable in head-on confrontations with FANK forces. An example of this may be seen in the attempted ambush of a small FANK security force by six KC and one Vietnamese adviser. Five of the KC had had no previous battle experience and suddenly broke and ran as a result of FANK resistance. All six KC and the Vietnamese adviser subsequently were captured by the FANK unit. Even mixed Vietnamese/KC units have had little success against recent FANK large-unit operations. In operation Chenla II the combined efforts of the [] regiments were not adequate to stop FANK from reaching Kampong Thum. It was not until regular Vietnamese units

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[redacted] entered the area that FANK began to have serious difficulty.

19. Recent activities of KC combat units have included the occupation of territory "liberated by VC/NVA forces," the harassment of Cambodian government lines of communication, small attacks against ill-defended government facilities, and the defense of local areas against minor FANK incursions. KC forces, exclusive of those predominantly Vietnamese main force units, have not been identified as being heavily involved in any of the larger confrontations between Communist and Allied forces. When FANK or South Vietnamese units have moved into an area in force, the KC units have engaged only in light harassing actions and then withdrawn. Given the present level of equipment and training, KC units are not believed to be capable of independent offensive operations into FANK-controlled territory.

20. Clearly, the mutual distrust harbored by the Khmers and the Vietnamese coupled with a Khmer lack of enthusiasm for the Communist cause is at the core of the problem not only of a low level of KC combat capability, but also of the high level of disputes and desertions. Despite these problems, however, the Vietnamese have succeeded in creating a sizable KC force structure. This has been accomplished partly by threat and impressment, as well as placing formerly discontented Khmer in positions of apparent authority in the KC structure. Many Khmer in Communist-controlled areas thus find it in their best interests to continue to cooperate with the Vietnamese.

Near-Term Outlook

21. The KC force structure is expected to continue its growth -- both quantitative and qualitative -- in the near future. Several new training camps have been constructed with a reported total capacity of several thousand men. These new camps coupled with the growing number of both Vietnamese and Hanoi-trained Khmer cadre being infiltrated into Cambodia should improve the instruction and indoctrination of the KC troops. The increasing use of ethnic Khmer cadre should also serve to relieve many of the problems resulting from Khmer hatred of Vietnamese. If the Vietnamese decide that they can trust the KC enough to equip them with modern small arms and crew-served weapons, KC military effectiveness will be greatly improved. The possession of modern arms not only should increase KC fire power but also would improve morale and increase KC independence. This increased independence may not appear to be entirely desirable to the Vietnamese, however, and they may withhold modern arms from many local KC units since the KC can still perform their population control function without them.

22. Even with the projected increases in KC strength and capability, they will probably not be able to pose a serious offensive threat to FANK forces in the near term. They are not likely to improve at a much faster rate than FANK, nor are they likely to be able to expand enough to outnumber FANK forces. Their primary role for the foreseeable future will continue to be the occupation of VC/NVA-liberated territory, with an increasing ability to defend that territory against minor FANK incursions. They also can be expected to become increasingly bold in striking lightly-defended FANK outposts. As the KC continue to expand, they can be expected to relieve some of the VC/NVA main force units currently tied down protecting major Communist lines of communication in Cambodia. These units could then reorient their activities toward Allied forces in Cambodia and adjacent areas in South Vietnam.